

**Oral History of Lillian Duerson** at Allen Terrace  
Lived in Northville area for 52 years. March, 1995

Q: Mrs. Duerson, where did you live when you first came to Northville?

A: I lived up on the hill at the end of Main Street, which was called Bloom's Wood, and there was only one house up there.

Q: And that was your house? Was this a house your husband built?

A: No, it was one that we rented and we could only have it for six months, and so we took it because we were moving to this area where his work would take him. He was with a cement company out of Jackson, Michigan.

Q: What was his job?

A: Well, he was a salesman.

Q: A salesman?

A: Yes.

Q: Well then, you could only live there six months. What happened at the end of the six months?

A: Well, then we found a house on Baseline. Baseline is the same as Eight Mile. We lived there for quite awhile. We lived in several places.

Q: Did you usually rent a house or own a house?

A: Yes, we rented.

Q: So you had been married just a short while before moving to Northville.

A: Yes. We were married in 1932. Five years then.

Q: Did you have children when you moved or did you have children after you got here?

A: Yes. We had one child. One daughter, she was three when we moved here.

Q: What was Northville like at that time as far as, was it just a small, little, small town?

A: Well, it was very quiet and they didn't have a City Manager. They had a Clerk, City Clerk, and the Manager came, oh I don't remember just what year it was. But, I wasn't working. I didn't work in the City then. I didn't work in the City until the 1950's. But, I can't remember. I should have written that down, I don't know.

Q: You had a young daughter then, and you were raising her and your husband was a salesman working for a cement company, so in the early years that you lived here in Northville you were at home raising your daughter.

A: That's right. My mother lived with me.

Q: Ah, your mother lived with you. OK, had she been ill or ...?

A: No. She just... after my father died, she had to come and live with us.

Q: I see.

A: And she lived with us for twenty-two years.

Q: Was she able to get out and do things?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: What kinds of things did your mother do here in Northville?

A: Well, she didn't do anything socially. She ... just things around the home.

Q: Did she like Northville?

A: Yes. I think she liked it. She grew up in a long cabin in Big Rapids. And the Indians used to come to the house.

Q: Is that right?

A: They'd walk right in the log cabin and sometimes, if it was winter, they would go in by the fire to keep warm and they had deer and wild turkeys and rabbits and usually one cow. And sometimes the Indians would walk right in the house, and they wouldn't know, they'd just walk right in.

Q: Now would they have lived on a reservation?

A: No. They had... they bought some land and this first land that they had was near Lake Chippewa and later they were in, about a mile and a half out of town, in a regular house.

Q: Well then your mother had some interesting experiences?

A: Yes, she did.

Q: Growing up in a log cabin. How old was she when she died?

A: 84.

Q: So she lived with you how many years? Twenty?

A: Twenty-two years.

Q: OK. Well then, I can understand then, with a young daughter and then a mother living with you, your early years in Northville were spent pretty much at home.

A: Yes, they were.

Q: Now, you note on your biographical statement that you did work. You worked in the City Clerks office. You worked from 1956 to 1962, six years. Where was the City Clerk's office located, and what was your job at that time?

A: It was located right where the library is. And I think the City Clerks office is in that same building and that's where it was.

Q: OK, this is not the existing building, this was an older building?

A: Yes, it was. It belonged to a Dr. Lapham, a woman, and I don't know much about her history or about that part of it. But it was just like a middle 1800 farmhouse.

Q: It might have been a farmhouse then?

A: Yes, it could have been.

Q: Was the space adequate for what had to be done in this office?

A: Well, the Police Department was upstairs, and the fines had to be paid for downstairs in the City Clerk's office. But the Police Department was small then. They had a Chief of Police; I think Joe Denton was the Chief of Police then.

Q: How big would the Police force have been at that time?

A: Oh, just one car.

Q: One car! Not too many problems in Northville to have to deal with then. That's good.

Tell me a little bit about your job as a clerk in the City Clerk's office. What was your responsibility?

A: Well, Mary Alexander was there, and she worked there for 27 years.

Q: And she was the City Clerk?

A: Yes. She did everything; got out the taxes, sent out the water bills. A very responsible clever woman. She had two daughters that she raised and stayed right there until she retired. By that time they had a City Manager. The first was John Robertson, the first City Manager. I can't remember the name of the second one. But Mike Allen was very active in affairs of Northville. He was a wonderful addition.

Q: Now who is Mike Allen?

A: Mike Allen. He owns the tombstone business.

Q: OK. Allen Monument.

A: This is right there at Seven Mile and Plymouth-Northville Road.

Q: Did he have a job with the city?

A: No, not a job. He was Mayor for many years.

Q: He was the Mayor. Now, was the Mayor paid or was this a volunteer position?

A: I think he was paid.

Q: Paid. Probably a small amount of money, and it was more or less a part-time job?

A: Yes. I'm trying to think if there was ... a Mr. Ely.

Q: Yes, I've heard that name.

A: He was Mayor for quite awhile, too.

Q: Tell me about Mike Allen and how he was involved and why Allen Terrace was name after him.

A: Well, he's a man who lived here a long time and he's interested in Northville and everything that's best for Northville. He was Mayor for a good many years. Did I mention that?

Q: Yes, you did.

A: A long time. He's still here. He's still active in the Presbyterian Church and he's active in many city affairs. Anything that's all for Northville.

Q: How old of a gentleman would he be now?

A: I imagine in his 60's.

Q: So he was instrumental in seeing that this Allen Terrace was constructed.

A: Oh yes, he was.

Q: And this is, you were telling me, this is actually owned by the City of Northville?

A: Yes.

Q: Allen Terrace is. It is not a governmental housing project or anything?

A: No it isn't.

Q: Well that's great. Do you have any idea of how many residents there are here in Allen Terrace?

A: In the building?

Q: Yes.

A: There are a hundred apartments.

Q: A hundred apartments?

A: Yes.

Q: All these are one-bedroom apartments?

A: Yes.

Q: That's nice.

A: All the same. Well, some are a little larger in that they allow for wheelchairs, and some have a larger store room than others and they try to make them available for the people that need them.

Q: That speaks pretty well for the City of Northville that they build a project for the elderly citizens to live in. That speaks very well.

A: He wanted to build an addition, but it was going to be too expensive this year, so they aren't doing it right now.

Q: Well, so you told me you worked in the City Clerks office. There was a Mayor and it was probably a ... well, first of all there was a City Manager. The City Clerk did most of the work at one time. Then a City Manager was hired. Then eventually there was a part-time Mayor. Now you mentioned also in your biographical data that you also worked for the Northville Record. Can you tell me how that came about?

A: I think I applied. There was an ad in the paper and I applied.

Q: And what was your job?

A: To do the Society and any extra things. And one thing was, oh, how a woman had a family of six children and how she kept her housework up. She said she changed one bed everyday. Then she wouldn't have to do it all on one day. Her children have grown up and they are. I don't think they live here any longer. That was just little articles that concerned the people who lived here and were in business here.

Q: This would be kind of interest then, because it was like kind of real life stories.

A: Mr. Cummings, when he bought the paper, he wanted it to be a small town country paper. Weekly paper. And he wanted a column showing the people and their interests, where they

lived, who they entertained, and where and when they went on vacation, which was not the best thing to do since people then knew when houses were vacant.

Q: Well, you're inferring the possible ... is being broken into.

A: Well, some people wanted their name in the paper a little more often than he thought was necessary, but that was alright. It filled a column.

Q: OK, you are applying for a job as the Society Editor to write articles. Did you have any previous experience in doing this kind of thing?

A: No. Only that little magazine, or did I tell you that?

Q: No. Tell me about the magazine.

A: Well there was a magazine in Lansing called Limelight. That two young men who were graduates of University of Michigan, later went into direct mail advertising and did very well with it. The New Yorker magazine had just come out about that same time. They thought they would compete. Well, they couldn't compete. But it was a magazine they called Limelight and it was social. Directly social.

Q: Now you mentioned to me when we were just chatting that you also took pictures. Tell me about that.

A: I didn't know anything about taking pictures. I just took the camera and they showed me where to push the button and I'd do it. And one time I had to go to South Lyon. Near there someplace was a big farm and they were having a turkey dinner, hundreds of legs and wings of turkey. I had to go out there to take pictures of that. Whenever there was a meeting of a Society, Business and Professional Women's Club, I had that one time to take some pictures of that place. And of the man that owned a jewelry store. Wherever I went, there was a news item, I took a camera along. I didn't know much about it, but I learned.

Q: You not only wrote articles, you also took the pictures?

A: And we had another column in the paper, about fifty years ago. So I would go up in the second floor of the building and get a hold of the old papers and just write what happened fifty years ago that day. But if we had ten pages, that was a big paper. And now it's about forty pages.

Q: They didn't do all the advertising I don't suppose that they do today?

A: There's a terrific amount of advertising now.

Q: And now they have incorporated other areas as well as Northville into the paper.

A: Yes, Novi, South Lyon and Brighton.

Q: Did you find it an interesting experience when you worked there?

A: Yes, I did. I liked it, it was very interesting.

Q: Now you said the gentleman's name was Glen Cummings?

A: Glen Cummings. He sold it to Bill Sliger.

Q: Mr. Cummings was quite a gentleman?

A: Yes. He was a very fine gentleman.

Q: And what did he do after he sold the Northville Record?

A: He opened up a business publishing bonds. For different companies that needed them.

Q: Stockbroker? Like a stockbroker?

A: Yes. And he had a printer and they had their own little building. The building between Northville and Plymouth. And then they just retired and went to Texas to live. He died there two or three years ago.

Q: Now you mentioned to me that your husband died in 1960. That was at a relatively young age. How old was he?

A: Sixty.

Q: He was sixty years old. And since that time, and you're in your 90's now, and your mother was with you for 24 years.

A: She died in 1957.

Q: She died in '57 and your husband died three years later.

A: And I went to Ann Arbor then to be a housemother and then I was working for the City.

Q: You're working for the City of Northville at the time in the City Clerk's office. Then went to Ann Arbor to the University of Michigan and became a house mother of one of the Sororities. How did you like that experience?

A: That was something! I can write a book on that. I wouldn't go into that right now. But it was very interesting, too, for the cultural things that the University offered. What we had access to was great.

Q: Now let me see, there's something else here that I wanted to ask you about. The Northville Review Club which was a book club. Tell me about that.

A: It was started by Louise Ryan and Carl Ryan was very active in the Presbyterian and sang in the choir. They had a very small choir then. They have a huge choir now, but they had about four or five people in it, and it was a good choir. But, she felt Northville could support a little book club. They called it the Northville Review Club, and just invited people that they thought

would be interested in it and at one time we had about eighteen members. Now there are about eleven. It's still going.

Q: You mentioned some of the names of some; I think you told me it has been in existence for 45 years. Mention some of the names of some of the ladies that belonged to that Northville Review Club, because I think that would be interesting.

A: Elizabeth Chapman was one and so many have ... Helen McCarthy, Mrs. Eaton, Levi Eaton, they were prominent in Northville, and Vance Masters was a member. Kind of hard to remember all of them.

Q: But these were rather prominent names in Northville?

A: Yes, they were.

Q: And this is a Club that's been in existence 45 years and you're still active in the club, in fact I think you told me you're the oldest member and you're doing a book review now.

A: Yes. I think I'm supposed to do one this month.

Q: Well, that's great. Social life in Northville. You came as a fairly newly married couple. What kind of social life was offered in Northville in 1937?

A: The social life was mild. It was just visiting, dinners in each other's home and football games.

Q: Tell me about football games.

A: People would always go and take an extra couple with them and sometimes they would take their lunch in the back of the car. Tail ... what do they call it?

Q: Tailgating?

A: Yes, tailgating.

Q: Predecessor of tailgating. Where were the games held?

A: In Ann Arbor.

Q: Oh, University of Michigan football games. Ok, I thought you were referring to the High School.

A: No, no.

Q: Now what other social activities were offered in Northville?

A: Really nothing other than going to football games and going out for dinner. That was it. It was very quiet. A quiet little town, that's what we liked.

Q: You did mention to me that you thought there was a roller skating rink here at one time.

A: I think that when I first came here, it was on the way out. But there had been one, and it was just going.

Q: And that would be primarily for young people. Teenagers, that type of thing? What about dances?

A: There weren't that many. They had been having the dances. The Pastime Club they called it. Just people got together with their own groups. There were several in the card playing, playing bridge, couples, eight couples probably, and having dinner. Just very nice social life.

Q: So a lot of social life was centered around the home?

A: Around the home mostly.

Q: Did you belong to a Bridge Club?

A: Yes.

Q: Ok. So there were several couples that were in this bridge club?

A: I just belonged to one, just women. There was one for couples.

Q: And then you would go to each other's homes for these bridge games?

A: We met about once a month. Once every two weeks. I've forgotten now. That went on for years and years until there wasn't anybody left of the original group. Just like the book club. I think I'm the only one left now, outside of Vance.

Q: The home the, was an important center of social life in Northville?

A: Yes, it was.

Q: Because there weren't a lot of other things available?

A: No, and people liked it that way. If they wanted some city life, they could go into Plymouth. We did go into Detroit to plays very often.

Q: OK. Let's talk about transportation. Now, here we're out in Northville and it's probably 35 miles into downtown Detroit. How would you get there?

A: I drive.

Q: Your own car?

A: Yes.

Q: OK. Were there some other options if you didn't drive?

A: No. I don't think there were any. There were streetcars. You could go to Five Points (7 Mile and Grand River), the conversion of Eight and Seven Mile and Grand River and you could go in there and get a streetcar or a bus. A streetcar I think. But most everybody drove their own cars.

Q: What about, was there an Interurban?

A: No. Not when I came in. The Interurban tracks were still on Main Street. Had not been removed and as it went down past ... up Griswold and on out 8 Mile for quite a while, there was a space on the right, on the south, side of the road where the track had been. Of course that's all gone now.

Q: So at one time there was an interurban out here, but this was before you came to Northville.

A: It was here and went to Farmington and from Farmington into Detroit.

Q: What about if you wanted to go to Plymouth, you would have to go by car? Or was there some other kind of transportation.

A: No. You had to drive yourself.

Q: Now you talked about some of the stores and markets and places in downtown Northville. For example you mentioned the meat markets and the peculiar things about what was on the second floor of the meat market. Do you want to tell us about that?

A: Well there was a theatre and there ... when my daughter was in high school, or it might have been before that, they took the class up there to look it over, to see what it was like. It had a box on each side of the stage. Very small.

Q: Could that have been an old Opera House?

A: No, I don't know that you would call it an Opera House. It was still there, but not being used. It was rather, nor recommended that they get a crowd up there.

Q: It was condemned?

A: I think so.

Q: It was considered to be a fire hazard?

A: I think so. Then Mr. Cummings. When this was going to be torn down, he was building a house on Six Mile and the Plymouth-Northville Road. He wanted the bricks that were in that old theatre. So he bought them or they gave them to him. I don't know, but he built a darling two bedroom home on the corner over there with those bricks.

Q: You mentioning earlier about the meat market and ...

A: Yes, there were three markets. Hill Brothers and one that was in the old theatre building and then Charlie LeFever on Main Street was where the Hole-in-the Wall store is.

Q: Oh, Genetti's.

A: Those were markets, they all had meat. Then a Kroger Store and a D & C Grocery Store where they, I think, where that fabric shop is. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ .

Q: What about that old dime store which is now closed up and moved out? Blacks Hardware is there now.

A: Oh that. Everybody in town was upset about that. Losing that 10 cent store we'd called it, because you could get anything there. Now you have to ... They have a store in South Lyon though if you want something they used to have at the D & C, you can go to South Lyon and get it. I thought I'm not going to buy anything at that Arbor Store. They took our D & C store away.

Q: Apparently, I understood they raised the rent on it, and people said they couldn't make money.

A: That's probably what happened.

Q: Your husband had a membership in the Meadowbrook Country Club. As I understand it the Meadowbrook Country Club is an old, old club. It's a golf club. Do you have any idea how old that club is?

A: No, I don't. His company gave him a membership for that, when we moved here. His company was located in Jackson, but, no I don't know. The Yerkes family figured in some way in that and for a long time the building that was the ... where they kept the clubs and everything. I don't know what happened to it. It's torn down. It seems to me it was the Yerkes farm.

Q: Might have been part of ...

A: Margaret Yerkes I'm sure could tell you that.

Q: So, it might have been part of the Yerkes property then that became the Meadowbrook Country Club.

A: Well, there were a lot of, I think four Yerkes brothers that settled out here. There was another Yerkes house on Eight Mile that I notice now. Is all boarded up because it was being ruined. And I'm sure there was one where the golf course is.

Q: Is there anything else that you can think of that you want to tell me about? We talked about you working on the Northville Record, as a Society Editor. You talked about working in the City Clerk's office and your responsibilities there, and we talked a little bit about social life. Your belonging to the Northville ...

A: We came here because it was a small town and we thought it would be a nice town to raise a child. Get out of the city. We had no desire to live in the city. Still you had the benefit of choice. You could go into Detroit to the stores and we did. I wouldn't drive down there for anything now.

Q: Do you have any idea what the population of Northville might have been when you came in 1937?

A: Around 3,000 I think.

Q: And, I presume there were still a lot of farms.

A: Maybe not that much, but it was around there.

Q: And I am presuming there were still a lot of farms in the area?

A: Well, yes. We used to have a Harvest Festival at the Presbyterian Church every fall. There'd be bushels of apples and vegetables from farm homes. There still were a few farms.

Q: Now, I noticed that there are still a lot of horses around here. Drive out Eight Mile and you can see horse farms. Were horse farms very prominent in this area.

A: Yes. They seemed to be. They were racing. When they had the Harvest Festival, they always had horse races, and there was no betting. The betting came in, oh, I don't know. Well I was here, after we came here.

Q: Where did the races take place?

A: Right down where the track is.

Q: Where the Northville Downs is now? That's where the races took place?

A: There was just one grandstand. A wooden grandstand, where you sat rain or shine, but no tote board.

Q: No betting. So that might be why there were so many horse farms out here, because they used Northville Downs for racing. Do you have any idea... was Northville Downs there at the time you moved here in 1937?

A: The track was there, but I don't think they called it Northville Downs. It was just a track.

Q: And so they had these races. Speaking of festivals, are you familiar with what I heard was called the Wayne County Fair?

A: No, I never went, or did I go to that? No I don't think I ever went to the fair, but they still do have it, I think.

Q: So there was such a thing?

A: Yes. And they had horse racing there.

Q: Now, do you have any idea where that Wayne County Fair took place?

A: Way out Woodward someplace. Over in that area. Way out in the country. It probably isn't the county now. They have a fair out there.

Q: In Detroit there is the State Fair which is on Woodward Avenue at 8 Mile, but I was given to understand that at one time, and maybe it was before you moved here, they used to have a Wayne County Fair that was held right out here in Northville somewhere.

A: Yes they did. We had a fair. I don't remember that it was in Wayne County.

Q: Well this has been an interesting interview and I appreciate it very much.

Q: I've just recalled something that Mrs. Duerson mentioned earlier when we were talking, and that involved a horse and buggy incident. She doesn't know the validity of it, but it's an interesting story and it involved Ruth Yerkes Burkman. Do you want to tell us about that?

A: Well, she told me herself that this was her experience. She was driving a buggy. A horse and buggy, and the horse ran away with her. It took her across Grand River and out to Walled Lake until it ran into Walled Lake and there it stopped because it couldn't go any farther. But I'm pretty sure she wouldn't be lying about it because it was one for the books, that ride.

Q: That would be quite a trip.

A: Well, yes. It was a dirt road, not paved or anything. That horse was thirsty I guess. I don't know what else.

Q: Went all the way to Walled Lake to get water. Well, that was interesting. Thank you very much.

Transcribed by: Sue Petries